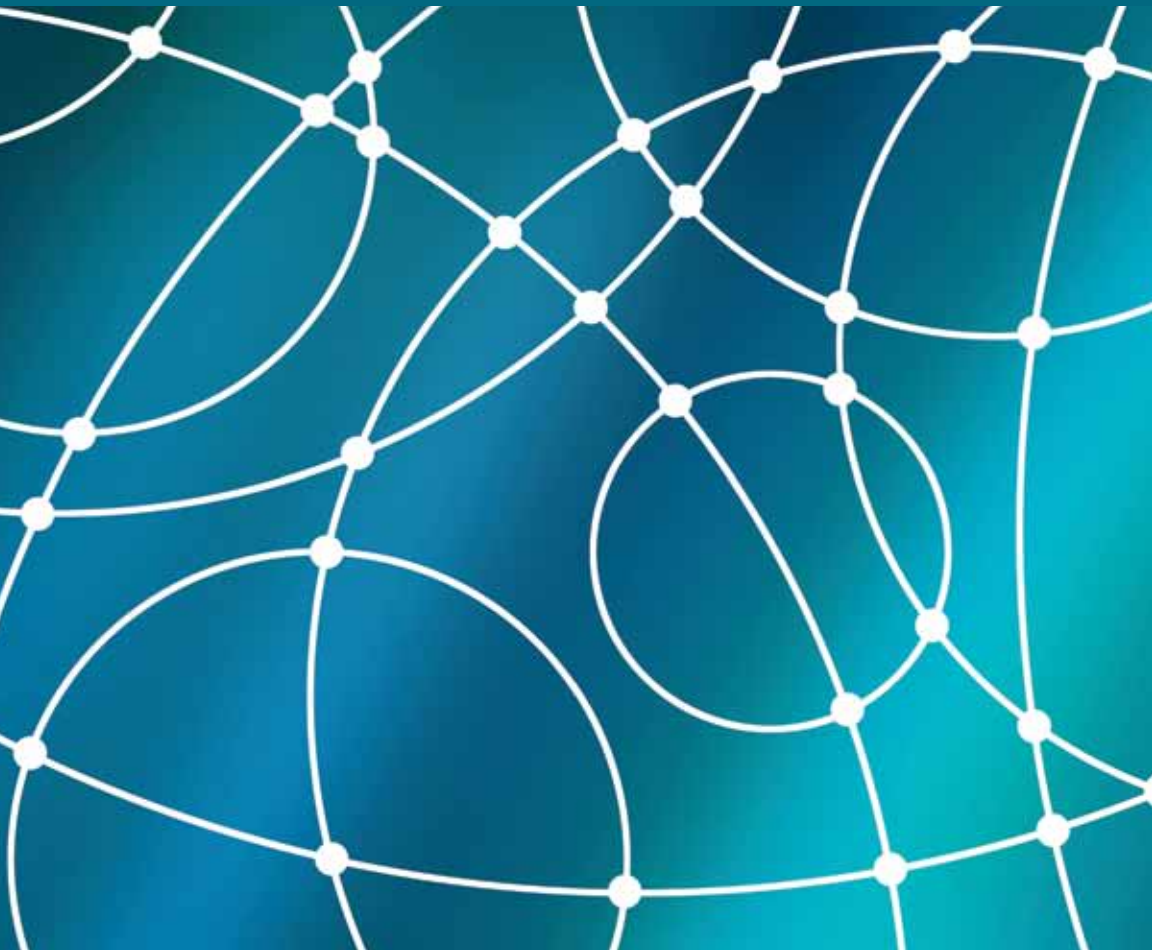
Christianity and Social Work

Readings on the Integration of Christian Faith and Social Work Practice

FOURTH EDITION

T. Laine Scales and Michael S. Kelly
Editors



CONTENTS

SECTION 2
CHRISTIANS CALLED TO SOCIAL WORK: SCRIPTURAL BASIS, WORLDVIEWS AND ETHICS

CHAPTER 10

FAIRNESS IS NOT ENOUGH: SOCIAL JUSTICE AS RESTORATION OF RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS

Mary Anne Poe

Social justice is a foundational concept for both social work practice and Christian faith. This paper identifies various historical definitions and approaches to thinking about social justice and explores the challenges that arise for Christians in social work who wish to integrate their biblical faith with current understandings of social justice. Justice as a legal term connoting fairness, especially in the distribution of and access to resources, has been the dominant conceptual framework through history. This paper presents a conceptual framework that goes beyond justice as fairness to describe justice as an ideal that reflects the human longing for wholeness and harmony in social relationships. Christian faith provides a standard for measuring this state of justice in relationships.

When my two daughters were young, I heard the refrain regularly, "But that's not fair!" Usually, this exclamation occurred over some rather trivial distribution of goods or punishments, like cookies or "time out." Their innate sense of justice had been violated and thus the appeal to fairness. Distribution of resources, retribution for wrongs, and concern for fairness have dominated the discussion about social justice through the ages. These approaches to social justice have directed attention away from the most fundamental meaning of justice—the restoration of right relationships.

Though the human reaction to perceived injustice often defaults to an appeal to fairness, as my daughters' reactions suggest, fairness is simply not adequate to satisfy the human spirit and longing for justice. Additionally, strategies for determining fairness are multiple and complex, including random selection, greatest merit, or first-come, first-serve. Both the processes for promoting and attaining justice and the final outcome are occasions for discontent in the human spirit.

Social justice is an ideal that has captured the imagination of people from the beginning of recorded history. Philosophers, theologians, and political leaders from every historic era have grappled with this most elusive virtue. Justice is one of the most sought after notions, with most every society invoking it as a worthy goal. John Rawls' classic work, *A Theory of Justice*, claims that it is

the "first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought" (Rawls, 1971, p. 3). The concept is deeply rooted in cultural and religious traditions and beliefs. Because people exist within culture, their understanding of justice is shaped by their cultural context. American revolutionaries had a quite different perspective on the justice of their times than either the American Indians or the British loyalists. This relativity of perspectives does not mean the ideal does not exist. Theologian Miroslav Volf (1996, p, 199) explains that we have to distinguish between the idea of justice and justice itself. Evidence of the efforts to make this distinction pervades the history of law, economics, and politics.

The Christian faith is deeply rooted in the idea of justice. The Old and New Testaments relate both conceptual themes about justice and narratives that describe its application in practice. Scholars have debated whether the two testaments describe different concepts of justice and its application or whether the Bible as a whole has one continuous theme of justice. Understanding the language of justice and the various meanings and applications of the Scriptures has been a major occupation through Christian history (Dunn & Suggate, 1993 McGrath, 1986; Solomon & Murphy, 1990).

In the twentieth century, the profession of social work claimed the promotion of justice as a core value in its code of ethics (NASW, 1996). To some extent, the profession emerged out of the mission of the church in the context of theological debates about the language and meaning of justice (Poe, 2002b). Defining social justice has been elusive for the profession of social work just as it has been for the Christian faith and for philosophers (Pelton, 2001; Scanlon & Longres, 2001). Banerjee (2005) conducted a literature review that revealed very little agreement among social workers about the meaning of social justice and how to achieve it.

This paper identifies through a broad overview various historical definitions and approaches to thinking about justice and gives consideration to some of the linguistic and philosophical difficulties. Since social justice represents a foundational construct for both social work practice and Christian faith, I will explore both challenges and points of congruence that arise for Christians in social work practice who wish to integrate their biblical faith with current understandings of social justice. Justice as a legal term connoting distribution of resources or fairness in court proceedings has been the dominant conceptual framework for thinking about justice in both historic Christianity and the profession of social work. This paper presents a conceptual framework that goes beyond justice as fairness to justice as an ideal that reflects the human longing for wholeness and harmony in human relationships.

Historic Understandings of Justice

Definitions of social justice abound, as do descriptions of various types of social justice. The most common idea of justice is distributive in nature. Distributive justice is concerned with how resources, material goods, influence, and power are shared among people. Sometimes this is summed up by the classic phrase, *suum cuique*, "to each what is due" (Hollenbach, 1977, p. 207). Retribu-

tive justice is concerned with punishing wrongdoers, commonly represented by the idea of "an eye for an eye." The American criminal justice system is largely based on retributive justice. In recent years, the criminal justice system has experimented with restorative justice, a form of justice that goes beyond punishing wrongdoers and strives to reconcile criminals and victims (Burford & Adams, 2004; Colson, 2001; Wilson, 2000). Commutative justice refers to a balanced and fair system for agreements or contracts, such as wage laws.

Historically, justice was seen as supreme among all the virtues. It was one of the four cardinal virtues. Socrates posed the question "What is justice?" to Plato in *The Republic* and launched the centuries-long philosophical discourse that has shaped much of western philosophy (Solomon & Murphy, p. 13). Cicero asserted two principles that defined justice. The first was to "do no harm, unless provoked by wrong." The second was to contribute to the common good or overall social welfare (as cited in Langan, 1977, p. 157).

For the ancient Greeks, justice was linked to human well-being, but it accepted class differences and inequality. Plato's conception of justice was one of harmony in the community, but within the community of one's natural status or class. Aristotle followed Plato's lead. He did not believe that people were equal. For him, justice was the single virtue that was directed at "the other" but justice did not require a redistribution of resources in order to arrive at a more fair distribution with the other. Rather, justice entailed accepting one's position in life in the hierarchical scheme established by one's birth (McGrath, 1986; Reisch, 2002).

The Greek philosophers reflect an enduring tension between the retributive principles of just deserts or vengeance that characterize some ideas of justice with the civic virtues of harmony and peace. The ideal of justice that Plato describes as a virtue has to be worked out in the practicalities of life. How do we achieve a just society?

In ancient religious and political practices, both in the East and the West, the appeal for justice is to a divine or singularly authoritative being, such as an emperor. Both the Bible and the Koran appeal to divine authority. The idea of "an eye for an eye" is balanced with appeals to divine and human mercy (Solomon & Murphy, 1990) and suggests the limitations of retribution, an "eye" and no more than an "eye." In ancient China and in Greece, Confucius and Plato assert the authority of the state in settling issues of justice (Solomon & Murphy, 1990). This early acknowledgement of the need for a standard bearer in identifying and upholding justice is a critical point for contemporary discussion of justice.

In *The Republic*, Plato asserts that "the just man and the just city will be no different but alike as regards the very form of justice." The way to identify or define justice is "when each one of us within whom each part is fulfilling its own task will himself be just and do his own work" (as cited in Solomon & Murphy, 1990, 36). The question of whose justice and what standard establishes justice endures to contemporary times. One modern effort to offer a global standard for basic human rights and justice is the United Nations' 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. The use of this document, though, requires interpretation about whether in fact justice exists in a given society and begs the question

about what privileges this document more than others to define human rights.

The idea of justice in the West bore the imprint of the ancient philosophers' questions about the nature of existence coupled with the theology of the church. Discussion about justice tended to be focused on civil order. In *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas joined the Christian faith and the metaphysics of the philosophers, especially Aristotle, to articulate a theology that dominated the life and thought of the Church until the eighteenth century. Regarding justice, Aquinas emphasized distributive principles.

By the eighteenth century, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau had given shape with various new twists to the idea of justice as a social contract (Solomon & Murphy, 1990). John Stuart Mill advocated utilitarianism as a means to arbitrate the social contract in the nineteenth century and, in doing so, further undermined the idea that justice is an ideal inherent in nature (Solomon & Murphy, 1990). The social contract idea has pervaded the discussion about justice until modern times and is reflected in documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In the twentieth century, John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* became the central and dominant voice about the meaning of justice (Banerjee, 2005; Solomon & Murphy, 1990). His theory is a version of the social contract but added the idea of social responsibility to those who are disadvantaged. By this time the idea of justice as an ideal or virtue, or as something more than mere distribution or retribution, had virtually disappeared from the conversation about justice. Justice was linked with the social contract and with the idea of fairness, whether in distribution of resources or in response to wrongdoing. The ancient Hebrew belief in an ideal state of harmony, peace, equality, virtue, and right relationships called justice had been set into a legal and rationalistic framework of contractual law. The essence or character of justice had given way to the practicalities of how to do it.

Biblical Backgrounds

The ancient Hebrew concept of justice appears in the earliest biblical records. The idea of justice is a central theme throughout the Old Testament as it gives an account of the history of the revelation of God's justice. In the Hebrew Bible, two words are translated justice: *sedaqah* and *mishpat*. These two terms are often used in combination for emphasis. *Sedaqah* is about God's plan to build community, to establish right relationships. Some older meanings connect the idea to victory and to the right ordering of affairs (McGrath, 1986). It is not used in the Old Testament in a legal sense to refer to punishment. *Mishpat* is commonly a legal term or claim on an individual. (Mott, 1982; Ripley, 2001).

Emil Brunner noted that the modern age restricted the original meaning of justice and its immense scope and reduced it to mean "giving to each what is due" (as cited in Lebacqz, p. 114). Mott (2000) claims that justice in the Hebrew mind was closer in meaning to "love" than to the distributive meaning of the modern age. Ripley (2001) asserts that the "root of God's justice, no matter how exacting, is always in the context of God's desire for a loving relationship."

McGrath (1986) analyzes the etymology for the Hebrew word *sedaqah* and asserts the fundamental meaning connects the idea to covenantal relationships and in that context to "conformity to a norm." The basic idea of *sedaqah* had meaning for the ancient Hebrews in the law court where the standard for the court was the covenant law with God, the Torah. Thus, being just was being in conformity to the covenant with God (Wright, 2006). It was bound to the idea of wholeness and harmony in relationships.

The New Testament treatment of justice continues the Hebrew focus on right relationships. *Dikaiosune* is the Greek word in the New Testament generally translated "justice" or "righteousness." According to Vine (1966, p. 298), it is the "character or quality of being right or just" or whatever has been appointed by God as right. It designates a relationship rather than an inherent personal quality (Williams, 1980). The word reflects the Hebraic concept of covenant, the establishment of a loving, faithful, and true relationship. A covenant is a binding commitment, with reciprocal benefits and responsibilities. The biblical sense of justice is one of hope and promise, salvation and victory, so that people will thrive in social relationships (Ripley, 2001). Wolterstorff (1983) connects justice with *shalom*. *Shalom* is the "human being dwelling at peace in all his or her relationships" (p. 70). Justice is fundamental to *shalom*.

The grand narrative of the Bible relates the story of justice. God created people who fractured their relationship with the Creator in an act of rebellion. The rebellion resulted in broken relationships, not only with God, but also in the family and throughout society. Human history provides the evidence of pervasive brokenness and records human efforts to create systems, structures, and laws that reach toward the establishment of justice, or a restoration of right relationships. The incarnation of Jesus, his death and resurrection, and redemption for believers provides a way to restore justice in all relationships.

Christian justice is not dependent on context or culture or individuals. It is founded on the very nature and character of God. The two great commandments, "to love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself" express this nature in a succinct fashion (Kunst, 1983, p. 111).

The Essence of Justice

When conflicts arose between my two daughters and their sense of justice was violated, I sometimes had them sit at a table together and take turns saying kind things to the other. They despised this discipline at the time, but the eventual result was usually laughter, their recognition of the many positive traits of the other, and a realization that good relationships were valuable. They had wanted me to be fair and punish the one who had wronged the other, but trying to arrive at "fairness" seemed to exacerbate the problem.

I could rarely assess who was at fault because I often had not directly observed the contested interaction. I also could not judge them equally responsible because they were not equal. Oliver Wendell Holmes once observed that "there is

no greater inequality than the equal treatment of unequals" (as cited in Rosado, 1995). One child was three years older, thus bigger, stronger, and more verbally adept. How could I determine fairness between the two?

I found trying to assess fairness frustrating and it did not produce the outcome that I actually desired. I wanted my daughters to grow old together, be lifelong friends, and enjoy genuine harmony and peace. What I wanted was a peaceful and loving relationship to develop between them and within the household. I wanted the *shalom* of the Bible.

A value such as social justice only has meaning for a culture if everyone has a similar understanding of what that value is. For example, love is a value esteemed in American society, but love means many different things to people. For one person, love is self-sacrifice. For another, it is a romantic liaison. Love may mean "never having to say you are sorry" or it may be "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Americans have not settled on a standard definition for love. Regardless of the number of definitions for love, the value is fundamentally social in nature. Justice, like love, is also fundamentally social in nature, and, like love, how it is understood depends on one's perspective.

Justice is dependent on the connections between and among persons. Justice is often associated with love or contrasted with charity or mercy (Sider, 1999). Augustine defined justice in terms of love in his essay, *De Moribus ecclesiae catholicae* (as cited in Langan, 1977, p. 173). Volf (1996, p. 223) asserts, "If you want justice without injustice, you must want love." Cassidy (1989, p. 442) suggests that justice is about "putting love into structures." If love establishes right relationships, then just structures serve to ensure the desired outcome; justice defines the laws or means that result in loving relationships. The apostle John captures this connection, especially in relation to distributive justice, "But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?" (I John 3:17, NASB).

It is much easier to identify justice by what it is not than by what it is. Injustice is easily recognized when it happens to us or to "our group." We are much less adept at identifying injustice when it happens to groups of others outside our familiar social categories. Only when we are well connected with others can we recognize when they are experiencing a sense of injustice. Thus, assessing justice requires a level of intimacy in relationships that acknowledges the experienced reality of others. We "enlarge our thinking" by listening to others, especially those with whom we differ, and allowing them to help us see from their perspective (Volf, 1996, p. 213).

Dorothy Day, a Christian activist in the Catholic Workers' Movement, voiced concern for justice in the 1930s. She said, "We need always to be thinking and writing about [poverty], for if we are not among its victims, its reality fades from us. We must talk about poverty because people insulated by their own comfort lose sight of it" (as cited in Kauffman, 2003). Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* extended the responsibility to know the experience of others far beyond the immediate family or neighborhood relationships. He said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (King, 1963, p.

77). Concern for social justice requires knowledge and understanding beyond one's own small circle of friends, extending to the world.

The Social Work Profession and Social Justice

The social work profession has its own history and claim on the concept of social justice. *The Social Work Dictionary* defines justice as "an ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits," (Barker, 2003, p. 404). This definition suggests a distributive principle in which resources and opportunities are spread about the entire population in a fair manner. Rawls' work has shaped the contemporary landscape for the profession of social work as well as for the larger society (Banerjee, 2005; Rawls, 1971). His development of the idea of the social contract rests on a definition of justice as relational, but based on fair distribution. He is also concerned that the least advantaged are helped in any process of redistribution. Other contemporary social work voices emphasize various dimensions of the concept of justice. Young (1990) argues for a relational type of social justice that includes more than simply a just distribution of goods, but also insists upon fair representation, participation, and influence in decision-making. Others have linked social justice with structures that lead to oppression and thus connected social justice to diversity and multiculturalism (Finn & Jacobsen, 2003; Reisch, 2002). In a more recent and radical step, Reichert (2001, 2003) believes that the lack of a clear definition for social justice begs for a shift in social work thought to that of a "rights-based perspective" utilizing the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* as a guide or standard.

The social work profession mandates that social workers challenge injustice. It is one of the six core values and ethical principles of the profession as written in the *Code of Ethics* of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2003) mandates in its *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* that curriculum includes social justice content "grounded in an understanding of distributive justice, human and civil rights, and the global interconnections of oppression." Though social justice is not defined explicitly by the CSWE in this document, it does assert that social work practice should entail "strategies to promote social and economic justice" and "advocacy for nondiscriminatory social and economic systems."

Wakefield (1988a) views social justice as the primary mission of social work and insists upon fairness and access to resources. Reid and Popple (1992) argue for a moral foundation to social work, an objective rule that supplies a standard for measuring what is right. They do not offer a source or basis for their moral foundation or describe the standard apart from the ethical assertions of the profession. Even though no clear agreement exists regarding the components of justice or appropriate strategies for achieving justice, the profession's conversation continues. Questions about whose rights trump the others' and how goods should be distributed seem to change with the winds of culture and political realities. Countless others in social work have written about social justice with

the usual emphasis on distribution of resources and access to them (Gil, 1998; Pelton, 2001; Scanlon & Longres, 2001).

Standards of Justice

Defining justice in social terms suggests the possibility that "right" or just relationships can happen, that a standard for right relationships exists. The challenge begins with describing what right relationships are like and is fulfilled with achieving them. Metaphors and symbols serve an important function as societies strive to achieve the ideal. Perhaps the most common symbol for justice is a scale. This symbol confines justice to the idea of distribution. It was used for measurements of goods until recent times. The scale as a metaphor illustrates the push and pull of often opposing voices striving for justice. It demonstrates the power of perspective and social location. In the construction industry a plumb line serves as a symbol of what is just. A wall is straight, or just, if the plumb line measures it as straight. The plumb line functions because of the law of gravity that establishes a universal standard of perpendicularity to the ground. Modern computers can "justify" margins either to the left or the right or the middle of a page. Accountants "justify" or reconcile the debits and credits for a business, bringing the account into balance. The ancient mythological image of Justitia, an angelic, blindfolded woman with a sword in one hand and scales in the other, represents an ideal justice that holds no special interest, is blind to the objects of justice and thus can render justice fairly and truly. All of these metaphors for justice rely on the idea that a standard exists by which justice can be assessed. The standard varies from a natural law such as gravity, to a balance between two existing products such as debits and credits.

From ancient time to the present, a system of measurements ensured a common and reliable standard for measurements of tangible materials. This system is gaining precision. In ancient times, the measurement of a foot, or twelve inches, was roughly equivalent to the length of a man's foot. In the present time, scientists can measure distance to sub-atomic precision in nanometers or to galactic proportions in light years. If justice is by its nature relational, it must be evaluated in relation to something, or someone, that is consistent across time and space. When measuring social relationships, the standard has to be a social relationship. Societies have produced social standards for justice, all of which have been declared obsolete or have changed over time. The emperor or king may have set the standard in some cases. When one king died, his standard of justice died with him. The new king had a different set of standards. In other cultures, laws and rules arose, but laws and rules change. Some cultures created and lived by mythologies or religious beliefs about gods who ruled the world. Whatever happened was at the will of the gods. People accepted the "justice" of the gods.

The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ poses an entirely different kind of standard. C.S. Lewis sums up his view of all the fundamental myths that have dominated human literature and culture in a 1931 letter to his friend Arthur Greeves: "Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on

us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference—that *it really happened*" (Hooper, 2004, p. 977). Christian faith offers an unequivocal and unchanging standard of justice—God in the person of Jesus Christ. If Jesus, the incarnation of God on earth, serves as the standard, then the acquisition of justice is dependent on a right relationship to this person.

Justice is not ever going to be satisfied by a set of rights or laws or moral principles or anything less than that encompassed in the story of relationship. Other approaches to justice lack a standard that is consistent over time and space by which to evaluate what is just. Jesus Christ is an historical figure. He lived, died, and was resurrected in history. He sets a standard for just relationships unparalleled in any other mythological or philosophical system. Christians, then, accept Jesus himself as the model and standard for justice. He was the bearer of a new possibility of human, social, and therefore political relationships (Scott, 1980; Yoder, 1972). How believers behave in social relationships is "just" based only on its likeness to the way that Jesus would have behaved. Jesus states it this way in Matthew 25: "to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to me" (Mt. 25:40, New American Standard Bible).

Two Streams of Christian Tradition

The Christian tradition is rooted in the grand narrative of the Bible, but Christian tradition is not pure. It represents coalescence of multiple cultures and times interpreting the Scriptures and the traditions in various ways. Volf (1996) argues that the church should not, even if it could, attempt to develop one "coherent tradition." Rather, the church should be interested in "affirming basic Christian commitments in culturally situated ways" (pp. 210-211).

The historic Christian tradition has produced two dominant streams of thought about social justice; one emphasizes the common good or institutional well-being, and the other the rights and responsibilities of the individual. Both offer a pathway toward a just and caring society, though with different means to the end. Many variations of these two themes have emerged through the years depending on the political, economic, and social context for the church.

The Catholic Church has a long tradition of Christian social teaching and represents an emphasis on the institutional community of faith and the common good. This tradition is marked by three fundamental values or premises: 1) All people are created in the image and likeness of God and thus have value and dignity; 2) God created people to live in community together; we are social creatures and need each other, and 3) Each person has a right to share in the abundance of nature, though this right is accompanied by responsibilities (Lebacqz, 1986).

For many centuries the Catholic Church dominated the western Christian landscape. The vision for justice was set in a worldview that understood individual rights, for each person was uniquely made by God, but the emphasis was on the social nature of our condition. It is for the welfare of individuals that society, and especially Christians, should be concerned for the common

good. The emphasis in Catholic social teaching on the common good serves as a harness to runaway individualism. It keeps in check the human tendency toward seeking one's own interests at the expense of others. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Catholic teaching understood Hebrew Scriptures to suggest that God gave preferential treatment to the poor and so should the church. The Bishop's Letter of 1971 asserts that the "justice of a community is measured by its treatment of the powerless in society" (as cited in Lebacqz, 1986, p. 72).

The second stream of Christian teaching emerged significantly during the years of the Protestant Reformation. As Martin Luther challenged the bureaucracy and practices of the Catholic Church, he ushered into Christian teaching what became a more privatized and personalized religious life. "Faith alone" became the theme of Protestant thought and eternal salvation the goal, not by works, but by faith. The phrase in Romans 1:17 (NASB), "the righteousness (*dikaiosune*) of God is revealed from faith to faith," served as a basis for Luther's stand that human effort could not achieve what the work of God could in the heart of a person (Ripley, 2001).

Each person had the ability and responsibility to stand before God with his eternal destiny in the balance. The kingdom of God and his justice (*dikaiosune)* described a future kingdom. Justice in this present age was beyond reach. According to some, the influence of the church to shape civil society decreased and interest in social justice declined as a result of the Protestant Reformation (Dulles, 1977; Emerson & Smith, 2000; Haughey, 1977; Lebacqz, 1986; Roach, 1977). However, other influences such as the breakdown of the feudal system with its social contract and the rise of urbanization and industrialization also had significant impact on how church and state both viewed social welfare.

How society approaches social justice depends somewhat on the starting place for discussion. The two streams of Christian thought represented by Catholic thought and Protestant thought are not as simple as described above. They are much more complex based on the particularities of the historical context and the multitude of voices that have articulated differing positions along the continuum. Catholic tradition certainly has not always emphasized the common good, nor has Protestant tradition neglected the pursuit of the common good. What began with Constantine as an attempt to Christianize the western world and serve the general social welfare devolved into a pursuit of political power and status among the clergy and systems of indulgences and penances that strapped the common folk. These two streams can serve, though, as a picture of the dichotomy, or tension, which exists between an emphasis on the common good and that of individual rights and responsibilities.

Linguistic Challenges

The ancient Greeks had two words commonly translated as justice. They are *isotes*, which means equality, and *dikaiosune* which is translated as righteousness (Solomon & Murphy, 1990). The selection of words used in translation suggests nuances of meaning, and over time translations can alter the original intent of

the user. Though *isotes* means equality, the ancient Greeks hardly espoused an egalitarian society. On the other hand, *dikaiosune,* when translated as righteousness, suggests a connection with the idea of personal and civic virtues that were so important to the ancient Greek philosophers. Language translation reflects the persistent difficulty in capturing the meaning of justice through history and across cultures and also within cultures.

The translation of the Bible has played an important, though subtle, role in how Christians have thought about justice. New Testament translations have a particularly powerful impact on current understanding.

The Latin Vulgate, used in the early life of the church, translated the Greek word *dikaiosune* into the word *justitio* (McGrath, 1986). Early English translations, such as the King James Version, translated the Latin Vulgate's *justitio* as "justice." After the powerful influence of the Reformation, and more translations developed, the New Testament rendering of *dikaiosune* often became "righteousness." With the Protestant emphasis on personal faith and individual rights and responsibilities, righteousness began to be connected commonly with personal regeneration and likeness to Christ. The connotation of social justice, that is right relationships between and among people, was subsumed by the drive toward personal morality and piety.

Interestingly, modern English translations seldom translate *dikaiosune* as justice. However, *dikaiosune* is the central theme in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew. It is used at every juncture to signify the mission of Jesus to usher in the kingdom of God. For his inaugural sermon in the synagogue at the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus draws on the prophet Isaiah's rendering of the future kingdom, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord" (Luke 4: 18-19, NASB). This seems to indicate that Jesus saw his own mission in "justice" terms as Isaiah had foretold. The coming kingdom was to establish "justice to the nations" (Isaiah 42:1, NASB). In fact, Jesus is announcing that he is justice incarnated (Haughey, 1977).

When *dikaiosune* is translated as righteousness, as it is in most modern English translations, it is commonly understood as doing what is right or holy and faithful to the promises of God as an individual. A pardon from sin "interiorizes the meaning too much and fails to account adequately for the dimension of practical social justice" (Scott, 1980, p. 85). This translation fails to evoke the "powerful social transformation" that the word suggests in the original language. Reconciled and restored relationships identify the central motif in all justice issues (Bader-Saye, 2003). Luther's reformation, though probably not intended by Luther himself, taught that God expects believers to be just, or righteous by their faith alone, an interior state of being. Belief in Jesus will ensure that people will have God's righteousness, but it can be a highly individualized and compartmentalized faith that has little relevance to social relationships and the larger social order (Ripley, 2001). Personal conversion and piety with a view

toward the afterlife become paramount rather than the present social order.

In contemporary society, the word "justice" inevitably draws one's attention to the legal aspects of the word. Distribution of resources, fairness in law, crime, and its consequences, and the system that executes "justice" over wrongs are the images that emerge. Justice and judgment are inextricably linked. The affirmation that "God is just" suggests that God is the great judge who will bring punishment and condemnation for wrongdoers.

The original linguistic intentions of *sedaqah* and *dikaiosune* that reflect a positive image of restoration of covenant relationships have been lost. The connection of justice with love and mercy has disappeared. Mercy and justice serve as contrasting approaches to wrongs committed rather than as a picture of restoration of wholeness.

Church and State

Since Constantine, the church in the West had assumed major responsibility for addressing social problems such as poverty, illness, and abuse. Understanding of the new life in Christ and biblical mandates, as well as tradition, suggested that the church was responsible for alleviating pain and suffering and providing for the needy. The poor and needy were offered help as an act of worship of God, not because they had a "right" to it. The church and synagogue were the standard bearers for social services (Leiby, 1985). The early church teachings, including the *Didache*, *The Shepherd of Hermas,* as well as teachings of Polycarp, Clement, Cyprian, and many others, asserted the rights of the poor and the responsibility of the rich. They exhibited a radical sense of community across economic strata (Walsh & Langan, 1977). The poor were seen as entitled to care because they are made in the image of God.

These teachings persisted through the history of the church, though the implementation of justice was certainly not always in accord with this ideal (Poe, 2002b). As Protestantism developed and the church and state became less bound together in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the nature of care for the needy changed; understanding of social justice shifted as well. Which social institution, the church or the state, was the keeper of social justice? Increasingly, the state alone became the arbiter of social justice. The rule of law articulated the standard for social justice and the means for executing it.

The profession of social work emerged largely from the impetus of the faith community and its adherents (Poe, 2002a). The motivation toward promoting social welfare was one's faith and the societal belief that God was concerned for all. In the early twentieth century as the social work profession was developing credibility, practice models, leadership, and relevance, its relationship with the faith community began to change. In the twentieth century, the social work profession bought into state jurisdiction of social welfare while evangelical and mainline churches largely relinquished it. The Catholic Church persisted with a strong emphasis on social justice in such efforts as the Catholic Workers' Movement, but it had lost a considerable amount of political power. Under the influence of the

Enlightenment, mainline Protestant churches reacted to an evangelical emphasis on personal regeneration and bought into a rationalistic and empirical emphasis during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Poe, 2002a). The state became accepted as the arbiter of social welfare and all issues of justice.

With the church as the entity giving meaning and direction for social justice, the standard for justice and indeed for all social relationships was Jesus. The aim was the kingdom of God. When the state became the defining institution for implementing social welfare services, the standard became the rule of law and human rights. The goal of social welfare shifted to following welfare policies, "regulating the poor," or controlling protest against injustice rather than eliminating injustice (Burford & Adams, 2004; Leiby, 1985; Piven & Cloward, 1971).

The modern evangelical church has largely missed its opportunities to promote justice during seasons of great social upheaval. Two examples may illustrate the impact that the privatization of faith and righteousness may have had on the role of the church as champion of social justice.

In the United States, the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s had little support from White, evangelical churches. The battle was fought primarily in the public and political arenas and the courts. The Catholic Church and more liberal, mainline Protestant churches had more representation, but, generally, the fight for social justice was dependent on the legal and political systems of the state. The Black church with its limited power embraced the idea of systemic change and provided leadership to advocate for it. It understood that the arbiter of justice was the state but they appealed to the witness of the church. King's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* (1963) illustrates his dismay at the inability of White clergymen to connect social justice and Christian living. The White evangelical voice was not engaged as an advocate for social justice.

Likewise, in the 1970s and 1980s, evangelical leaders were not concerned with apartheid in South Africa. The "talk was of justification, personal, wonderful justification by faith, but never of justice" (Cassidy, 1989, p. 73). Individual church leaders, such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, were advocates for biblical justice. The South African ship of state, though, hearkened for many long years to a rule of law that was undergirded by an entrenched but flawed theological system that privatized faith and left social justice out of the equation. Both of these social movements reflect the power of the state to shape social welfare policy. The voice of the church was mediated by individuals through governmental structures, leaving the true witness of the institutional church for social justice to be compromised.

Contemporary Challenges

A challenge exists for both the social work profession and biblical Christianity when defining and promoting social justice. For the profession, the challenge is to identify what standard can be used to evaluate the attainment of justice. Reichert's suggestion to move the profession away from the concept of social justice to one of human rights does not solve this problem (Reichert,

2001, 2003). In fact, to abandon a foundational value of the profession due to its elusiveness seems irresponsible. The profession has to grapple with its roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition that provided a philosophical and ethical basis for the values that shaped its development (Sherwood, 1996). It surely cannot be satisfied if each person has their portion and their rights, but relationships between and among people are still fractured and strained.

The *NASW Code of Ethics* asserts in another of its six core ethical principles that social workers are to recognize the central importance of human relationships. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, while extremely valuable as a guide toward distributive justice, does not give guidance to restore broken relationships and establish *shalom*. And though it is used as a standard, measuring alignment with the standard is elusive. How much education or health care does one have a right to claim? While grounded in the belief that being human merits certain rights and deems one worthy of value, it simply aims at freedom from harm and a minimal fairness in material distribution and access to resources. It does not in fact offer a universal standard for determining when the claims of justice have been met. The profession separates social justice and human relationships into two separate core values. These two values are inextricably linked and undergirded as well by the NASW core value of the worth and dignity of the each person.

Christians do have a universal and objective standard for measuring justice, though Christians themselves do not have the capability of fully attaining or even assessing alignment with the standard with precision. This poses a challenge.

Another challenge is to restore the balanced, biblical understanding of justice that includes both the individual and the social dimension of the concept. Personal faith has to be accompanied by an engagement in the social dimensions of righteousness as reflected through orthodox Christian belief and tradition. Not doing justice is not an option for Christian discipleship. Consider the multiple appeals of the prophets to "do justice" (Micah 6:8, NASB); to "establish justice" (Amos 5:15, NASB); to "preserve justice" (Isaiah 56:1, NASB). The justice of the Bible is not simply fairness. It includes an "embrace of the other" (Volf, 1996, p. 221). What matters is the relationship. This is ultimately what defines justice for a Christian believer. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that social advance in history does not "roll on the wheels of inevitability. Every step towards the goal of justice requires…tireless exertions" (as cited in Cassidy, 1989, p. 463).

The exertions promoting social justice suggest personal responsibility and engagement in the social order. The triumph of early Christianity was its radical sense of community, that everyone would be brought into the fellowship and cared for (Walsh & Langum, 1977). Christians are called to faith and works that lead to a restoration of right relationships, whether an individual's relationship with a neighbor, the relationship of one tribe to another, or one nation to another. Fairness simply does not satisfy the demands of justice.

Societies have constructed elaborate systems of laws and rules, and in the process have settled for fairness as the ultimate expression of justice. The distributive principle of justice has dominated the thinking. The Christian concept

of justice, based on biblical principles, involves much more than fairness in the distribution of resources. It is fundamentally a restoration of relational harmony.

Jesus serves as a model for demonstrating justice by the manner in which he related to different people and different societal institutions. He did not treat everyone the same, as though some law or guidebook instructed him. Rather, Jesus demonstrated the capacity to make nuanced judgments, informed by laws but not restricted by the merely human standards or customs of the day. Jesus touched the untouchables, breaking the rules but offering a possibility of restored relationships to a community. He challenged the religious leaders, again violating the customs of the day, but in so doing, offered to the community a chance for *shalom*. Jesus crossed ethnic and gender barriers that produced oppressive environments in efforts to demonstrate what a just and caring world might require. Ultimately, Jesus' death and resurrection give hope to the Christian faithful and a vision for a community of wholeness.

Christian social workers must struggle along with the profession regarding how justice plays out in the world. Christians should be concerned about the distribution of resources and power and access to these resources. They should be concerned about legal systems and human rights. Christians should also strive to understand the biblical concept of social justice, grounded in the very nature of God, and the implications for a just society that is guided by Christian faith. As Christians in social work, the ultimate goal for practice entails a much deeper and richer reality for the nature of human relationships than fairness. The movement in criminal justice settings toward restorative justice is one example of the yearning for this approach.

The prophet Micah proclaims for all time the requirements of God for his people, "to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8, NASB). In the poetic literary tradition of the Hebrew language, this is not three requirements, but one. Doing justice, loving kindness, and walking with humility are rhyming thoughts in Hebrew. They are all part of a unified endeavor that brings wholeness to relationships in the community.

Thus the radical call of God for justice is more than just an even distribution of goods or a fair retribution for wrongs. It is concerned with the quality and nature of the relationships between and among people. This is what I wanted my daughters to experience together in their simple experiences of injustice and this is what I desire for Christians who give their lives to promoting social justice in their social work practice.

References

Aquinas, T. (1981). *Summa Theologica*. Westminster, MD: Christian Classics,.

Bader-Saye, S. (2003). Violence, reconciliation, and the justice of God [Electronic version]. *Crosscurrents, 52*(4), 536-542.

Banerjee, M. (2005). Social work, Rawlsian social justice, and social development [Electronic version]. *Social Development Issues 27*(1), 6-24.

Barker, R. (2003). *The Social Work Dictionary* (5th ed.). Washington D. C.:NASW Press.

Burford, G. & Adams, P. (2004). Restorative justice, responsive regulation and social work. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, 31*(1), 7-26.

Cassidy, M. (1989). *The passing summer: A South African's response to White fear, Black anger, and the politics of love*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Colson, C. (2001). *Justice that restores*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Council on Social Work Education. (2003). *Handbook of accreditation standards and procedures, (5th ed.)*. Alexandria, VA: CSWE.

Dulles, A. (1977). The meaning of faith considered in relationship to justice. In J. C. Haughey, (Ed.). *The faith that does justice: Examining the Christian sources for social change*. New York: Paulist Press.

Dunn, J. D. G & Suggate, A. M. (1993). *The justice of God: A fresh look at the old doctrine of justification by faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Co.

Emerson, M. O. & Smith, C. S. (2000). *Divided by faith: Evangelical religion and the problem of race in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Finn, J. & Jacobsen, M. (2003). *Just practice: A social justice approach to social work*. Peosta, IL: Eddie Bowers Publishing Co.

Gil, David G. *Confronting Injustice and Oppression: Concepts and Strategies for Social Workers*. New York: Columbia UP, 1998. Print.

Haughey, J. C. (Ed.). (1977). *The faith that does justice: Examining the Christian sources for social change*. New York: Paulist Press.

Hollenbach, D. (1977). Modern Catholic teachings concerning justice. In Haughey, J. C. (Ed.) *The faith that does justice: Examining the Christian sources for social change*. New York: Paulist Press.

Hooper, W. (Ed.). (2004). *The collected letters of C. S. Lewis, volume 1*. NY: Harper San-Francisco.

Kauffman, R. A. (2003). Justice. *Christianity Today, 37*(3), 70.

King, M. L. Jr. (1963). *Why we can't wait*. New York: The New American Library-Mentor Books.

Kunst, T. J. W. (1983). The kingdom of God and social justice [Electronic version]. *Bibliotheca sacra 140 (April-June),* 108-116.

Langan, J. P. (1977). What Jerusalem says to Athens. In Haughey, J. C. (Ed.) *The faith that does justice: Examining the Christian sources for social change*. New York: Paulist Press.

Lebacqz, K. (1986). *Six theories of justice: Perspectives from philosophical and theological ethics*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

Leiby, J. (1985). Moral foundations of social welfare and social work: A historical view. *Social Work, 30*(4), 323-330.

McGrath, A. (1986). *Justitia Dei: A history of the Christian doctrine of justification*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mott, S. C. (2000). Foundations of the welfare responsibility of the government. In S. W. Carlson-Thies & J. W. Skillen (Eds.). *Welfare in America: Christian perspectives on a policy in crisis*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Co.

Mott, S. C. (1982). *Biblical ethics and social change*. New York: Oxford University Press.

National Association of Social Workers. (1996). *NASW code of ethics*. Washington D. C: NASW Press.

Pelton, L. H. (2001). Social justice and social work [Electronic version]. *Journal of Social Work Education. 37*(3) 433-439.

Piven, F. F & Cloward, R. A. (1971). *Regulating the poor: The functions of public welfare*. New York: Vintage Books.

Poe, M. A. (2002a). Christian worldview and social work. In D. S. Dockery & G. A. Thornbury (Eds.). *Shaping a Christian worldview: The foundations of Christian higher education*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers. Pp. 317-334.

Poe, M. A. (2002b). Good news for the poor: Christian influences on social welfare. In B. Hugen & T. L. Scales (Eds.). *Christianity and social work: Readings on the integration of Christian faith and social work practice* (2nd ed.). Botsford, CT: NACSW.

Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Reichert, E. (2003). *Social work and human rights*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Reichert, E. (2001). Move from social justice to human rights provides new perspective. *Journal of Professional Development, 4*(1), 5-11.

Reid, P. & Popple, P. (1992). *The moral purposes of social work*. Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall Press.

Reisch, M. (2002). Defining social justice in a socially unjust world [Electronic version]. *Families in Society*, *83*(4), 343-354.

Ripley, J. I. (2001). Covenantal concepts of justice and righteousness, and Catholic-Protestant reconciliation: Theological implications and explorations [Electronic version]. *Journal of Ecumenical Studies, 38*(1) 95-109.

Roach, R. R. (1977). Tridentine justification and justice. In J. C. Haughey, (Ed.). *The faith that does justice: Examining the Christian sources for social change*. New York: Paulist Press.

Rosado, C. (1995). God's affirmative justice, *Christianity Today, 39*(13) 34-35.

Scanlon, E. & Longres, J. F. (2001). Social work and social justice: A reply to Leroy Pelton [Electronic version]. *Journal of Social Work Education, 37*(3) 441-444.

Scott, Waldron (1980). *Bring forth justice*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Co.

Sherwood, D. (1996). Asking the impertinent question: Why should I care? *Social Work and Christianity, 23*(2) 79-85.

Sider, R. (1999). *Just generosity: A new vision for overcoming poverty in America*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

Solomon, R. C. & Murphy, M. C (1990). *What is justice? Classic and contemporary readings*. New York: Oxford University Press.

United Nations. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Retrieved June 13, 2006 fromhttp://www.unhchr.ch/udhr/lang/eng.htm.

Vine, W. E. (1966). *An expository dictionary of New Testament words with their precise meanings for English readers*. Old Tappan, NJ; Fleming H. Revell Co.

Volf, Miroslav (1996). *Exclusion and embrace*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.

Wakefield, J. C. (1988a). Psychotherapy, distributive justice, and social work. Part 1: Distributive justice as a conceptual framework for social work [Electronic version]. *Social Service Review*, *62*(2), 187-210.

Walsh, W. J. & Langan, J. P. (1977). Patristic social consciousness: The church and the poor. In J. C. Haughey (Ed.). *The faith that does justice: Examining the Christian sources for social change*. New York: Paulist Press.

Williams, S. K. (1980). The 'righteousness of God" in Romans [Electronic version]. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, *99*(2), 241-291.

Wilson, J. (2000). Crying for justice: When victims in grief meet offenders in shame, profound new healing takes place. HOPE, 3-8.

Wolterstorff, N (1983). *Until justice and peace embrace*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Co.

Wright, N. T. (2006, May 1). Righteousness. *New Dictionary of Christian Theology*. Retrieved on 5/1/2006 from http://www.ntwrightpage.com/right_NDCT_Righteousness.htm

Yoder, J. H. (1972). *The politics of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Co.

Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.